

PRODUCE DECONTAMINATION APPARATUS

This invention relates to produce decontamination apparatus and, more particularly, to the decontamination of produce by free radical washing.

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Fresh produce is typically washed, post harvest, with various decontaminating solutions containing biocide, such as chlorine / chlorine dioxide, ozone, or any number of combinations of chemicals. This is intended to reduce the risk of introducing potentially damaging or pathogenic microorganisms to the consumer.

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However, the use of chemicals within the food chain is now less acceptable, and many chemical biocides are now limited by legislation.

Traditional techniques of sanitisation or decontamination use vast quantities of water, which is also a valuable commodity.

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The present invention seeks to provide a solution to these problems.

According to a first aspect of the present invention, there is provided produce decontamination apparatus comprising a chamber for accepting produce to be decontaminated and/or sterilised, and means for producing a free radical saturated atmosphere within the chamber so that, in use, the free radical saturated atmosphere decontaminates and/or sterilises the produce.

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Preferable and/or optional features of the invention are set forth in claims 2 to 12, inclusive.

According to a second aspect of the present invention, there is provided produce
5 decontaminated using produce decontamination apparatus in accordance with the first aspect of the invention.

The invention will now be more particularly described, by way of example only, with reference to the only accompanying figure which shows diagrammatically a cross-
10 sectional elevation of one embodiment of produce decontamination apparatus.

Referring to the figure, there is shown produce decontamination apparatus which comprises a substantially enclosed chamber 10 which is open to atmospheric pressure and which has a produce inlet 12, a produce outlet 14, an air inlet 16, a pumped
15 chamber exhaust 18, and two conveyors 20 and 22.

Each conveyor 20 and 22 includes a conveyor belt 24 and 26 fully housed within the chamber 10. The conveyor belts 24 and 26 are vertically spaced apart and horizontally positioned relative to each other so that one end of the upper conveyor belt
20 24 overhangs the lower conveyor belt 26. A produce flow path is thus generated horizontally along the upper conveyor belt 24, vertically down from the upper conveyor belt 24 to the lower conveyor belt 26, and then horizontally along the lower conveyor belt 26, as indicated by arrows A.

The vertical spacing between the upper and lower conveyor belts 24 and 26 is adjustable through an adjustment mechanism (not shown). The adjustment mechanism typically allows height adjustment of the lower conveyor belt 26, as shown in the figure by the phantom lines 7 and arrows B. However, the upper conveyor belt 24 could alternatively or additionally be height adjustable.

Sprayheads 30 are located within the chamber 10, and form part of means for producing a free radical saturated atmosphere. The sprayheads 30 are provided along the full extent of the produce flow path A. More specifically, the sprayheads 30 are provided at a constant spacing directly above each conveyor belt 24 and 26 and also at the vertical spacing between the upper and lower conveyor belts 24 and 26. Since the vertical spacing between the upper and lower conveyor belts 24 and 26 is an open space, the sprayheads 30 are provided on at least two sides.

The sprayheads 30 are atomising sprayheads and discharge a non-condensing mist of liquid having a droplet size of between 1 and 15 microns. The average droplet size is preferably 5 microns.

The sprayheads 30 are divided into ozone and ferric sprayheads 30a and 30b. The ozone sprayheads 30a are fluidly-connected to a first supply 32 of ozonised liquid, typically being ozonised water; and the ferric sprayheads 30b are fluidly-connected to a second supply 34 of liquid, typically water, having ferric ions. The first and second supplies 32 and 34 reside externally of the chamber 10.

The first supply 32 includes a reservoir 36 and a pump 38 for supplying the liquid in the reservoir 36 to the ozone sprayheads 30a at the correct pressure to ensure atomisation. The liquid passing from reservoir 36 to the ozone sprayheads 30a is initially pumped through a venturi 40 or any other similar device by which ozone from an ozone generator 42 can be introduced. The ozone concentration is regulated at between 1 and 5 parts-per-million (ppm).

The second supply 34 includes a reservoir 44 and a pump 46. The liquid in the reservoir 44 is charged with ferric salts, such as Ferric Sulphate, typically in the concentration of 10 to 15 ppm. However, different concentrations depending on necessity can be used.

The ferric sprayheads 30b and the second supply 34 together form means for catalysing the breakdown of hydrogen peroxide which is formed by the breakdown of ozone discharged as part of the ozonised liquid from the ozone sprayheads 30a.

The ozone and ferric sprayheads 30a and 30b are provided in alternating fashion along the produce flow path A. A ferric sprayhead 30b is provided at the beginning of the flow path A.

Means for breaking down the ozone discharged as part of the ozonised liquid from the first sprayheads 30a are in the form of ultraviolet light emitting devices 48, typically being UV fluorescent tubes. The UV light emitting devices 48 are waterproof and are mounted along the full extent of the produce flow path. Specifically, the UV

light emitting devices 48 are positioned at a constant spacing directly above the upper and lower conveyor belts 24 and 26, and at the vertical spacing between the two conveyor belts 24 and 26. As with the sprayheads 30, the UV light emitting devices 48 are positioned on at least two sides at the vertical spacing between the two conveyor belts 24 and 26.

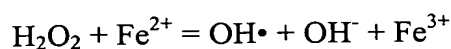
Further UV light emitting devices 50 are also provided in any redundant spaces within the chamber 10 to ensure full exposure of the ozonised liquid to the ultraviolet light.

The UV light emitting devices 48,50 emit ultraviolet light at wavelengths of between 185 and 253.7 nanometres.

To catalyse the breakdown of the ozone discharged as part of the ozonised liquid from the ozone sprayheads 30a, the interior surfaces 52 of the chamber 10 have a coating including an ozone catalysing agent or agents. At least one of the ozone catalysing agents is titanium oxide or titanium dioxide. This coating forms ozone catalysing means, and helps to ensure that there is no build up of ozone contamination within the chamber 10.

Ozone in solution breaks down rapidly when subjected to ultraviolet light to form hydrogen peroxide H_2O_2 , which itself then breaks down to form peroxide radicals $HO-OH$, and finally highly reactive hydroxyl radicals OH^\bullet and OH^- . The rate of conversion from hydrogen peroxide to hydroxyl radicals can be greatly enhanced by the

use of ferric ions Fe^{2+} , which act as a catalyst during their conversion to ferrous ions Fe^{3+} . This is generally known as Fenton's Reaction, and follows the formula :



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In use, a dense mist is generated in the interior of the chamber 10 through discharge of atomised ozonised liquid via the ozone sprayheads 30a and atomised liquid having ferric ions via the ferric sprayheads 30b. The atmosphere within the interior of the chamber 10 thus becomes saturated with free radicals resulting from the catalysed breakdown of the ozone of the discharged ozonised liquid and the hydrogen peroxide.

To ensure that the free radical saturated atmosphere does not leak out to the general environment in which the apparatus is placed, the pumped chamber exhaust 18 generates a slight negative pressure within the chamber 10 by recirculating a portion of the free radical saturated atmosphere (arrow C) and promoting the ingress of ambient air through air inlet 16 (arrow D).

Produce to be decontaminated or sterilised is introduced into the chamber 10 through produce inlet 12 (arrow E). The produce is first subjected to a spray of the liquid having the ferric ions from the ferric sprayhead 30b at the beginning of the flow path A. This initially coats the surface of the produce with liquid having ferric ions. The produce is then exposed to the ozonised liquid from the next ozone sprayhead 30a. This ensures that free radical generation is strongest on the surface of the produce.

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The produce travels on the upper conveyor belt 24 and moves along the rest of the flow path A through the dense free radical saturated atmosphere within the chamber 10. Depending on the produce and the length of time needed for sufficient decontamination, the speed of the conveyor belts 24 and 26 can be adjusted.

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The produce drops through the vertical spacing between the upper and lower conveyor belts 24 and 26. This enables the entire exterior surface of the produce to be fully exposed to the free radical atmosphere as it passes through the vertical spacing, and also the positioning of the produce to be altered from one conveyor belt 24 to the conveyor belt 26, thereby allowing other surfaces of the produce to be exposed to the free radical atmosphere for an extended period.

Again, depending on the produce, the distance of the vertical spacing between the upper and lower conveyor belts 24 and 26 will be pre-adjusted to prevent damage to the produce.

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On reaching the end of the flow path A, the produce exits the chamber 10 through the produce outlet 14 (arrow F) and is collected by any suitable means.

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By the generation and use of free radicals, a powerful oxidising agent and biocide can be utilised to decontaminate produce. This can be enhanced by the use of Fenton's Reaction and the incorporation of a second liquid having ferric ions.

The volume of liquid necessary to produce the dense free radical saturated atmosphere within the chamber is nominal, and is preferably two to four litres per hour per sprayhead. By way of example, a chamber having twenty sprayheads therefore uses no more than eighty litres of water per hour. Such a chamber has a produce
5 decontamination capacity of several hundred kilograms per hour.

It is thus possible to provide apparatus which can decontaminate or sterilise produce without the need for submersion in a chemically treated liquid. It is also possible to provide apparatus which dramatically reduces the amount of liquid required
10 for decontaminating produce.

The embodiment described above is given by way of example only, and modifications will be apparent to persons skilled in the art without departing from the scope of the invention as defined by the appended claims.